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AUTHOR Adler-Kassner, Linda
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ABSTRACT

This paper poses the question of whether it is possible to teach writing (or work with teachers teaching writing) so that public perceptions of students, and of writing, change. The paper elaborates on the question--Is it possible to: (1) use writing as a way to eradicate deficit-based notions of students and their abilities; and (2) use writing to change public perceptions of the purpose of "writing" and of education more generally? The paper's author states that these questions permeate her teaching and suffuse her work as a writing program administrator (WPA) and contribute to what she thinks of as her role as the director of an "activist" writing program. The paper considers what an activist writing program is, explaining that, like service-learning programs, activist writing programs are concerned with participating in public discussion, but that, unlike service-learning, an activist program does not necessarily link its own interests to those of outside communities. It then discusses several models for activist writing programs. The paper concludes by describing Eastern Michigan University's Celebration of Student Writing--a kind of fair where students create projects based on their research work in a second-semester course and which culminates in a display of projects at the end of the term. (NKA)

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By Linda Adler-Kassner
Eastern Michigan University

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CS 510 768

Developing an Activist Writing Program: Possibilities and Challenges

Linda Adler-Kassner, Eastern Michigan University

At the end of the course I teach for graduate instructors in the fall, we read excerpts from Hepzibah Roskelley and Kate Ronald's book, *Reason to Believe*. There, they refer to Mary Rose O'Reilly, who wanted to address a "big question" through her teaching: Is it possible to teach writing so that people stop killing one another?" I want to start this presentation with *my* big question, and a number of other questions and points related to it:

> Is it possible to teach writing (or work with teachers teaching writing) so that public perceptions of students, and of writing, change? That is, is it possible to: 1) use writing as a way to eradicate deficit-based notions of students and their abilities, and 2) use writing to change public perceptions of the purpose of *writing* and of education more generally?
>
> Related to this question, how can writing classes and writing programs become places where students learn about the possibilities that writing opens for them, and where students, teachers, and others can *advocate* for themselves, for others, and for *what it means "to learn?"*

These questions permeate my teaching in that graduate course, as well as my work in all of the other courses I teach. They also suffuse my work as a WPA, and contribute to what I think of as my role as the director of an "activist" writing program.

What is an "activist" writing program?

In the last fifteen or so years, we've thought a lot in composition about what it means to make writing more public – witness the enormous number of courses and instructors incorporating service-learning. These classes reflect desire to bring learning inside of the classroom and community life outside closer together, and a desire to help students develop a sense of what it means to participate as a citizen in broader publics. The emphasis in service-learning programs is on *service* and *reflection* – students serve communities that presumably are working to better the lives of their members, and reflect on their work with those communities. Of course, for the service-

learning course or program to be successful, the instructor/administrator should also work in the interests of the organization. The idea embedded in service learning courses is that education and service help to advance the public good, and this emphasis, on civic development, reflects a stance toward participation in public life that has been present in American culture since the nation's founding.

So while service learning courses and programs provide a method to work for social change, they do so comfortably within the framework of mainstream American culture and values. One need look no farther than George H.W. Bush's "Thousand Points of Light" program, which facilitated large scale service and service learning projects for evidence of this. Service, and service-learning, have been embraced by the left and the right.

Like service learning programs, activist programs are concerned with participating in public discussion. But unlike service learning, an activist program doesn't necessarily link its own interests to those of outside communities. An activist program has an agenda – it is focused on advocating for the interests of students in the writing program, and therefore for particular conceptions of writing and literacy that serve those students.

Unfortunately, the current climate for discussions about education and literacy isn't as comfortable as the one that exists for service learning. It provides a fierce challenge for the activist writing program, since current public discussions about literacy generally reflect vastly different positions, values, and ideals than the ones embraced by most literacy educators, including most WPAs. President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Act illustrates the point, explicitly linking definitions of school success to test scores, providing funding for schools whose scores are seen as good (or getting better), and stipulating sanctions for schools whose students do not achieve minimum proficiencies. As E.D. Hirsch, whose work is often and sometimes unfairly associated with this movement, would have us understand, "there is a tide." That tide is turned against literacy

educators who look at writing, reading, and learning as something more than developing a set of easily accessible, assessible strategies.

The challenge for the activist WPA, then, is to work within these ongoing discussions about literacy and education, but try to shift their terms. Fortunately, we're not alone in this work. We join our colleagues in college-level writing instruction who have long advocated for alternative conceptions of literacy. We can also turn to an abundant literature on curriculum reform targeted to K-12 education. Finally, we can look to the work of K-12 teachers who have advocated for best practice in education. Cathy Fleischer, our colleague at EMU, has written a book for teachers that is intended to serve as a guide for educational organizing called *Teachers Organizing for Change*. The book provides models from and for K-12 teachers advocate for whole language learning with audiences from classroom parents to state legislatures; it also draws on interviews with community activists and literature from community organizing to point to ways that teachers can more effectively advocate for educational change.

Models

In her book, Fleischer outlines five orientations reflected in community organizing: Education Orientation, Planning/Development Orientation, Mobilizing Orientation, Social Action Orientation, and Advocacy Orientation (85-107). I would argue that activist WPAs most frequently see themselves as "mobilizers." Most of the time, we're concerned with day-to-day administrative work. But sometimes, we find ourselves in the position of fire-stoppers, mobilizing support for or against particular initiatives or approaches. We see this a lot on the WPA listserv, for instance – someone e-mails because their institution has suddenly decided to use the COMPASS exam as the sole placement method for basic writing, or raise class sizes to 35, or outsource basic writing instruction. The WPA works work to fight the decision and try to change it, gathering support for her actions among their colleagues on campus and, sometimes, among other members of the

profession. This is mobilizing: It's short term and it often addresses the immediate problem. But a mobilizing orientation can't do all of the work that activists WPAs need to. It is *intended* to be short term; it is almost always **reactive**, rather than **proactive**. We might stop the use of the assessment; we might get class sizes capped at lower numbers; we might save stop the outsourcing. But these actions only address the current manifestation of one idea about literacy development and education, not the idea about literacy development and education itself. As you can see from the overhead, some WPAs and organizations to which we belong – WPA and NCTE/CCCC – already employ these orientations in different ways, in bits and pieces. But to get to the **idea**, to change the larger system, we need to think about how to put them all together strategically, so that our work with them (and other whatever other approaches to advocacy we use) is systematic. As the overhead demonstrates, we do some of this now, but it's not tremendously systematic, nor is it coordinated across schools. Certainly, our K-12 colleagues can become a model for this. But we also face challenges that these colleagues do not, and which are important for us to consider as we begin to build our agendas. For better or worse, the structures framing K-12 work are more rigid than those surrounding the work that many of us do. Sate standards, arguments for increased assessment, and even national educational programs can become focal points for advocacy work because teachers don't agree with them. Working from that disagreements, they can then be used to focus and expand discussion. In college writing, we don't often have these kinds of identifiable targets. In fact, as long as no one complains about student writing and/or reading in most colleges and universities, writing and writing programs receive relatively little attention. There are exceptions, of course, like CUNY or the California State system – but these really are exceptions.

What do we have?

Thus, we must stop and consider: what *do* we have? Occasionally we have public discussions literacy at the post-secondary level. A search of library databases using the term "developmental

writing" returns a raft of articles focusing on student performance in college writing classes, or on assessment tests. Sometimes, these coalesce around particular issues. Certainly, these are instances where activist WPAs can use the mobilizing orientation to combat these efforts, and to advance more sophisticated conceptions of literacy and learning. But as I mentioned earlier, they're short term, they're reactive. Most of the time they don't get us *further* than we were, they only help us to hold our ground.

Part of our challenge, then, is to find a way to advance our agendas *beyond* mobilizing – to educate, to plan and develop, to advocate. One way we activist WPAs might advance our agendas, as I've already mentioned, is to find what ground we do share with our colleagues in K-12 education and join our voices with theirs where and when appropriate. I say this with some caveats, though. University faculty have a long history of walking into K-12 situations wearing what I've come to think of as "the big pants," the belief that we know what's right and how to do it the right way. We *certainly* don't want to wear the big pants – not only because we don't know *generally*, but because the kinds of teachers I'm alluding to have more experience with this kind of work than many of us do. We also want to acknowledge that while we share interests and broader goals with K-12 teachers, the specifics of our work can vary greatly, and we need to understand those variations… not just differences in student loads and job definitions that are often pointed to in this kind of comparison, but also issues connected with the broader structures that shape all of our work.

Starting Places

I would argue that the first place we should start is with exploring mutual interests, investigating questions of concern to college and high school teachers, the kind of work that reflects an Education Orientation. At EMU, we hope we're taking a step in this direction with a new departmental initiative that involves working with secondary teachers to identify issues of mutual interest to both them and us and exploring those issues through teacher-research groups. Thus far,

we've met with AP English teachers from a nearby school district, and it looks like we're about to embark on a multi-tiered project with this district that will involve exploring the expectations and experiences of learning by teachers and students in high school and college.

Students

We also can turn to other assets at our disposal – ones which we can use *proactively* to educate and sustain involvement with broader visions of literacy and writing. And the strongest asset we have at our disposal are **students**. When I describe them this way, I am not implying that students are our tools, or that the primary purpose of our course should be to "convert" students to our ways of thinking. But we have hundreds, sometimes thousands, of students in our programs each semester, and they speak with powerful voices about what they believe writing, and education, to be in every class that they take. To begin, we can listen to them talk about their experiences with literacy education. As an individual instructor, for instance, listening to students describe how they defined writing and reading led me to develop a different curriculum for my basic writing – a change that reflects an education orientation, as well.

Field work

As a WPA, listening to students also led me to develop one of the most important activities in our graduate instructor workshop, "field work." On field work day, which takes place during the two-week workshop we hold before the semester begins, instructors travel around campus in pairs, interviewing whomever they can find about what they see as the purpose of composition instruction and about college writing. When the teams return, we talk about what everyone has heard and how these perceptions play into the course structures and assignments that instructors have started to develop.

Talking about what we do and why we do it with students *and* with outside audiences then becomes a theme to which we return throughout the semester and the year. Every opportunity we

have *to* talk about writing, as Susanmarie will discuss, is a chance to promote our ideas, to make a case. I don't mean that we badger our audiences with talk about "how things should be done," though – I mean that we work hard to listen to what others say about writing, and then to ask the right kinds of questions, gently provide alternatives, in what we all hope is a thought-provoking way.

We need to be ready to seize moments for discussion, too, and field work helps instructors think about when those are and how to take advantage of them. EMU is a fairly hierarchical, top-down institution; when a graduate instructor bumps into an associate dean in the hallway, as one did during the field work session two years ago, they need to be prepared to have a conversation about "your approach to composition" when the associate dean asks about it, as this one did. This kind of hallway encounter represents an opportunity we can't afford to pass up.

Finally, it's possible to focus students' work on projects that can both affect the ways that students think about writing, and affect the perception of writing and students with other audiences. Last year, we initiated the Celebration of Student Writing, which Heidi is going to talk about in more detail, to accomplish this. Briefly, the Celebration is a kind of fair where students create projects based on their research work in our second semester course. For 1-1/2 hours on a day at the end of the term, everyone displays their projects and looks at the work of others at the Celebration. The Celebration is all about visibility, about buzz, about talk.

With the Celebration, we wanted to change our campus discussion about first-year writing, which up to that point was nasty, reductive, or non existent. When we piloted the Celebration with 550 students last winter, we just wanted to have students have different kinds of conversations about writing than the ones that we heard at the beginning of our classes. For the fall Celebration, we wanted to get some of those conversations into broader venues – campus media, and even the local press. We achieved the first goal, though not the second – stories *before* the Celebration in the student newspaper, the *Eastern Echo*, and in the faculty-staff bulletin, *EMU Focus*. The President and

the Associate Provost also attended the second Celebration – no mean feat at EMU. At the third Celebration, in about a month, we think we're going to have a number of high school and community college teachers and their classes come to view the work of about 750 students participating.

The Celebration works on multiple levels. Students whose work is included often leave finding that writing and literacy development *do* go beyond the classroom, and carry this idea with them to other courses. The campus community, through the newspaper and visits by faculty and administrators, encounter writing that they normally take for granted, ignore, or complain about, finding that students have remarkable ideas represented in unique ways. And we have a way to talk with high school students and teachers about the ways that we conceive of literacy education in our setting, opening up opportunities for dialogue with them about the ways that they envision it in theirs and how we might work together to affect changes in both contexts.

With this project, as well as with other work we're doing like the project with high school colleagues, we're trying to find ways to change the conversations about writing and literacy on our campus, and maybe in other venues as well. Nevertheless, this still feels like an enormous project, and I'm left with questions:

- How can we continue to change discussions about literacy and education on our campuses?
- How can we change the perception of writing, and WPA work, to support and sustain change?
- How can we affect broader conversations about literacy and education *outside* of our campuses?

Hopefully, we can take up some of these during the discussion.

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